

Demystifying Academic Writing

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Abstract In this chapter I debate the nature of writing, and specifically academic writing. Relying on the concepts of knowledge telling and knowledge transforming, invention, and creativity, I argue that academic writing should be treated as all other forms of writing. Since any writing happens in a process, requires attention to audience, content, and form, teaching writing for the academe should focus on student writers, their interests, needs, and capacities. When academic writing is taught in a foreign language, instruction may tend to focus on formal aspects of language. Whenever this is the case, writing practice easily becomes decontextualized, which, as a consequence, may lead to resentment on the part of novice writers. In such situations, it is particularly important that the requirements of formal register and academic genres, rather than as limitations, are seen and taught as means of facilitating communication within the academic discourse community. I therefore conclude that the writing instructor's role is that of an experienced guide who establishes a learning environment in which his advice and feedback help the novice develop new writing, language, and critical thinking skills. In this way, even foreign language students can develop not only their formal knowledge of the target language and academic genres, but also skills and strategies of expressing themselves in writing.

1 Introduction

Judging by the number of divisions made in all sorts of academic and didactic publications, one could assume that second language writers hardly ever engage in first language writing, let alone foreign language writing. Or that the writing process has little to do with the writing product. Likewise, attention paid

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specifically to Academic Writing could suggest that writing in the academe is something completely different from any other form of written communication. As a writing instructor (or should I say EFL academic writing instructor?) I have been wondering about the nature of the subject I teach. Does teaching people to write academic texts mean insisting that they use “advanced grammar” or is it enough if they use “correct grammar”? Should they use “elaborate vocabulary” or will “precise vocabulary” do? (As long as it is spelled correctly...) And what about the reader? Should I, as so many authors suggest, make my students respect their audience, which—by the way—more often than not is purely hypothetical, as their texts get read only by myself and a couple of classmates? Or maybe I should follow Elbow’s (2000) advice and just let them express themselves... Finally, is it fair to expect my students to produce perfect papers, or should my writing practice aim first of all at developing themselves as writers? This chapter is an attempt to answer some of these important questions. In my answers, I refer to the reading I have done in the field, but first of all to my writing experiences, the most significant of which was writing my Ph.D. dissertation. Thanks to my guide in that process, Professor Jan Majer, I learned and understood a lot, both as an academic researching the field of foreign language writing, and as a foreign language writer myself.

2 What is Writing

There have been many attempts to explain the nature of writing by comparing it to other experiences. Some authors see writing mainly as an act of creation (building, carving), for others it more like discovery (exploring, mining), yet others stress the waiting inherent to writing, as in surfing or hunting (Nordquist 2012). Probably the best known metaphor used to explain what writing is is the one which Elbow (1998) made the pivot organizing his seminal book *Writing without Teachers*—cooking. This one is really tempting because it involves both the process and the product as well as the social role food plays in our lives. Yet, to me writing is like traveling.

To set off on any journey we need a stimulus that not only spurs us to act, but also determines which direction we go and how fast we wish to reach our destination. Depending on that drive, we make other choices, related to who travels with us, what we want to take with us, or what means of transport to use. Then comes the travel itself, with all the uncertainty and unexpected events it brings about until we reach our destination. Finally, travel leads to change in people, which is one of the reasons why it has mesmerized writers for centuries. Similarly, writing starts with motivation and preparation of what needs to be packed in the text. Then, the writing process, like travel, involves choices, decisions, strategies, and leads to a destination—the product. Inevitably, just like travel changes the traveler, writing develops the writer. Our travels vary, depending on the distance, aim, company; likewise, we write differently for different audiences and purposes.

Granted, writing this text is different from writing an email message to a friend, or writing a poem for an unspecified readership, but is it so different that it should be deemed a totally different activity? Are these experiences really farther apart than going to a conference on my own is from going on vacation with my family? Is it all not merely a matter of relativity?

3 Invention

All writers engage in knowledge telling and knowledge transforming. Scardamalia and Bereiter (1987) see the former as consisting in generating text content. It leads to a text which is created in a natural flow, with little reorganization, and—as a consequence—control over the text content may be absent from the writing process. Such process of text creation is typical of writers who have a limited grasp of concepts of audience and purpose, which are basic to rhetoric. This spontaneous, or naïve, process of text creation is contrasted with knowledge transforming, in which a more experienced writer solves problems and communicates with the reader in a more conscious way. Clearly, it would be an oversimplification to assume that these two writing models are mutually exclusive; rather, they constitute two extremes of one phenomenon, and to some extent most, if not all, writers both tell and transform knowledge. What is characteristic of different kinds of writing is the unique balance between the two. While some writers tend to, or can, respond to their readers' expectations better than others, this also derives from the nature of writing they are involved in.

It seems evident that good academic writing relies on problem solving rather than spontaneity: it should abide by conventions familiar to the writer and the reader, and rely on schemata shared by both. On the other hand, this does not mean that scholarly writing is devoid of invention. According to Lauer (2004: 22) the rhetorical purposes of invention in ancient Greece included “initiating discourse with questions, issues, or contradictions, creating knowledge, reaching probable judgment, finding argument to support existing theses, communicating truths or supporting persuasive propositions.” All these purposes are valid in modern writing, and even though, just like ancient rhetoric, academic writing is governed by conventions, the academic audience, like the gathering in the agora, expects to be enticed in the text by the author's skills of invention.

4 Creativity

Is *creative writing* the only kind of writing which allows creativity? McKee (1967) asserted that “all good writing is creative,” and—generally—it is hard not to agree with him. As Adams-Tukiendorf (2011) observes, creativity has been viewed as a capacity to identify a problem, to produce and evaluate possible solutions, and finally to select one of them and verify its effectiveness. Understood in this way,

the concept of creativity applies to formal academic writing in no lesser degree than to poetry writing, and no-one could deny that the papers collected in this volume are creative in this way. Indeed, creativity approaches the notion of knowledge transforming. What good would any text do, whether a poem or a scholarly article, if it did not offer a new outlook on the topic it tackles? Again, it is a matter of balance, and doubtlessly, some texts require more creativity on the part of the writer, and some writers may be more creative by nature. There are chances that, thanks to their involvement in divergent thinking and knowledge transforming, readers will appreciate their texts as more creative and inventive.

5 Writing Process

All writing emerges in a process. Each writing process is different and its complexity depends on the nature of the text. Here, it matters how elaborate the text is, how much effort its creation requires from the writer. Even though different models of writing process have been proposed, which differ in the number of stages and their mutual relations (c.f. Murray 1972; Flower and Hayes 1981; White and Arndt 1991; Adams-Tukiendorf and Rydzak 2003), it seems that the simplest and the most universal one is a modified version of the original Murray model, which involves three general stages: pre-writing, writing, and re-writing, but also allows for their recursion, e.g. acknowledges the fact that a writer may not dutifully proceed from pre-writing to writing and then to re-writing, but sometimes may move in the opposite direction or even be simultaneously engaged in a number of activities assigned to different stages of the process.

There are no reasons to assume that academic texts are, or should be, born in any peculiar processes, varying in any significant way from the processes other, e.g. so-called creative, writers are involved in—the three-part model is easily applicable to all writing processes. The pre-writing stage may involve brainstorming ideas for a five-paragraph essay, freewriting for a short story, or analyzing data for a research paper. Of course, the “writing proper” stage will comprise making choices of precise vocabulary for a descriptive passage or using appropriate reporting verbs in a literature review. Respectively, revising may mean perfecting rhymes, or checking bibliographical entries. The differences result from the peculiarities of genres, registers, and strategies, but all writing processes can be equally demanding on the part of the writer, and may equally contribute to his development.

From the explanation provided by Scardamalia and Bereiter (1987), it can be seen that knowledge telling constitutes a simpler process in which the text is created in a smooth flow, while knowledge transforming requires more conscious interaction between the writer and the text, or in fact the audience. Knowledge-telling processes are, then, related to invention and creativity, and they can be characteristic of academic as well as of any other writing activity, the only limitation seems to be within the writer: his or her experience, involvement, and dedication to appealing to the reader.

6 Writer in (Con)text

Ivanič (1998), modifying Fairclough's (1989) social model of communication, explains the interrelations between language and the context in which it is produced. She assumes existence of three layers: first, text; second, processes of production and interpretation; and, finally, context, or social conditions of production and interpretation. Her rendition of the model stresses clearly how language, through its production and interpretation, reflects social reality of the context in which it is used. Ivanič further extends Fairclough's model to literacy and argues that written language, not less than speaking, depends on the social context in which it appears. A text is produced and interpreted in the context of interpersonal relations, then in the second layer, in *practices* and *discourse types*, and finally, in the third layer, it arises from *values, beliefs, interests* and *power relations*. It can be easily concluded that the main area where different kinds of writing vary is the second level of practices and discourse types.

For Ivanič, this model of language use, in which text is immersed in and dependent on social interactions, is the starting point for her discussion of identity in academic writing. Since every writer's identity is created within the discourse community he or she is part of, it is clear that academic writers are not only expected to abide by the language, genre, and social norms, but also, in spite of these limitations, there is scope for them to develop their unique style and personality, by which they contribute to the growth of the entire community and the field.

7 Academic Writing

A definition of academic writing is easy neither to find nor to formulate. Nordquist (2013) approaches the task from a textual perspective, and sees academic writing as

[t]he forms of expository and argumentative prose used by university students and researchers to convey a body of information about a particular subject. Generally, academic writing is expected to be precise, semi-formal, impersonal, and objective.

This perspective characterizes academic writing through the prism of genres typically employed by the academic community. On the other hand, the word *writing* can also be read as referring to human activity, and in this sense

the best academic writing has one underlying feature: it is deeply engaged in some way with other people's views. Too often, however, academic writing is taught as a process of saying 'true' or 'smart' things in a vacuum, as if it were possible to argue effectively without being in conversation with someone else. (Graff and Birkenstein 2007: 3)

However, it has to be admitted that academic discourse community does not only say "semi-formal, impersonal, and objective" things "in a vacuum"; its members engage in professional exchanges and discussions, often quite animated,

and sometimes even humorous and self-ironic (cf. publications on writer's block by Upper (1974) and Didden et al. (2007) in *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*).

The above quotes use *academic writing* as a term denoting either the writing product, governed by the norms existing in the academe, or the writing process, a way of communicating with other members of academic discourse community. This duality may have consequences in the approach to the teaching of writing. Instructors who see their role mainly in increasing their students knowledge of the language forms appropriate in the academic context may tend to employ the product or genre approaches to writing, whereas those stressing the communicative nature of *academic writing* are more likely to take a social constructionist stance.

The latter approach creates conditions for the development of the writer. Rather than imposing appropriate, but decontextualized, lexical and rhetorical forms, it allows “academic acculturation” of the student in the process of learning, and, in fact, in the process of writing.

Social construction of writer identity is only possible in interaction, regardless of the context or the type of writing involved. Therefore, effective teaching of academic writing must involve, like in developing any other kind of writing (in fact, like in any communicative classroom), practice immersed in linguistic interaction. This involves, first of all, information exchange in specific social contexts. Accurate use of language forms and following genre norms are important elements of good writing, especially of academic writing, but they are not ultimate goals for writing instructors, as they do not suffice to represent the writer in text. Additionally, as Hyland and Hyland (2006: 206) observe, the teacher's feedback has the function of “guiding the learner through the *zone of proximal development*.”

8 Foreign Language Writing

Learning academic writing in a foreign language adds another layer of difficulty which student writers face—as often happens, with their limited writing experience, they are being simultaneously acculturated into a completely unfamiliar discourse community and into a foreign language speech community. This doubles the difficulty, and makes students pay more attention—whether consciously or not—to formal aspects of language (Piotrowski 2008). In such a situation the content of a paper may be seen as being of lesser importance, since learners are often used to being assessed on formal accuracy of their texts (Salski 2012).

In the special, and exceptionally difficult, case of academic writing instruction being combined with foreign language development, it seems particularly important that special attention should be paid to the content of the course and of the individual assignments. Such instruction must pertain to student writers' needs and interests, and evaluation must reflect how successful student writers have been at communicating with their readers (of course, abiding by the norms accepted in the discourse community). Failure to acknowledge the communicative aspect of

academic writing, or any kind of writing, equals ignoring the student as a person, together with the need to initiate her to the academic (discourse) community. Feedback in teaching writing must be directed at the learner as a person, not at the text (Hyland and Hyland 2006); needless to say, such feedback, referring both to form and to content, provides the students not just with evaluation of her (linguistic) performance, but also with a reader's reaction to the text which she has created.

9 Student Expectations

A discussion of what teaching writing involves cannot be complete without taking student perspective into account. This is particularly valid since my basic argument is that academic writing instruction should not be seen as setting limits to student writers' creativity, invention, or personality, but exploring new opportunities for communication between a novice and the professional community she is entering. It is important, then, to look into the expectations that the novice may have of the new learning experience.

It would be a mistake to assume that students have little expectations regarding a writing class, even though their experience in or awareness of writing may be limited. In an informal survey I asked a group of first year students to comment on their expectations about the writing class they were beginning. The responses I got helped me understand a lot about my students and what my class should give them. One of them wrote:

To be honest I expect a lot. I hope I will be able to develop my writing skills and creative thinking. Imagination and crossing lines play a big role in my life. I expect rules and schemes that are compulsory in many kinds of writing, but I'm not going to deny that I'm more of a free-style writer. What comes first for me is expressing myself, what I think, my inner thoughts which I can't express in a different way. I deeply believe that my composition class will help me find a new approach to more informative writing because it's obvious that it is really important to write fluently about everything in many ways.

It is amazing how easily the student captures the delicate balance between invention and self-expression on the one hand, and communication and genre requirements on the other. She appreciates writing as a way of voicing her ideas and hopes to maintain its personal and creative character. At the same time, she wants to make her writing more informative, which she seems to understand as easily appealing to different audiences. Simultaneously, she is aware of the context-specific principles and expectations that govern written communication. In this particular case, instruction insensitive to the student writer's individuality, limiting *academic writing* to a set of rules that have to be followed within specific genres, could prove discouraging and, as a result, counterproductive.

10 Teaching Implications

Unless we treat writing merely as a tool of self-reflection, self-expression without intention to address a reader, we need to acknowledge the fact that, just like speaking, it is a means of interaction. Academic writing, then, cannot be limited to interaction with sources, but has to be understood—just like other types of writing—as an intricate interrelation between text and context, production and interpretation, the writer and the audience. Teaching writing should, then, not aim merely at instilling scholarly standards, but rather at socializing students into academic discourse community.

The role of a writing instructor should be seen, in the social-constructivist sense, as that of a guide who is more experienced in the field and more proficient in academic writing skills. Such approach allows novice writers to develop, rather than to simply internalize new knowledge and skills. In this way novice writers develop genre competence and appropriate strategies, adapting to the norms functioning in the discourse community, within meaningful reader-writer interaction and without giving up their individuality, or need for self-expression.

Learning academic writing means development in two related areas. First of all, it should be understood as developing writing skills, strategies of text production and revision, as well as engaging in communication in and about writing; on the other hand, linguistic requirements are an important aspect of learning to write for the academic audience. This has been clarified by Leki:

The novice writer needs instruction on the process that writers go through in order to produce texts: a process of exploration and generation of ideas on paper; of seeking out appropriate feedback; and of reworking and revising the presentation of these ideas. The novice writer also needs to learn how to meet the demands of the academy by attention to form, format, accuracy, and correctness. (Leki 2002: 3)

To prepare their students for these expectations, academic writing instructors must remember that they are introducing learners to a new culture. On the one hand, such approach is more complex than teaching new genres and appropriate language forms; on the other, it cannot ignore the role of the student writer: both as the student (providing her with meaningful and relevant practice), and as a writer (insisting that she claims the authorship of the texts she writes).

11 Conclusion

Whether we take into account the processes involved in texts construction, or how a writer becomes and functions as a member of a discourse community, writing in the academe is—in broad terms—a kind of travel. With very specific destinations and with quite demanding travel companions, it requires careful preparation and possibly unique strategies, but in fact, so do other trips. Like travelers, writers are

adventurous and inquisitive by nature, so teaching writing should be about showing students how to benefit from the discoveries and encounters inherent to writing, and how enriching an experience it can be. Instruction which stresses limitations, instead of opening new horizons, will not inspire students, especially those who apart from academic writing are also learning a foreign language. I wish that all those who think that being an academic contradicts being a writer would one day follow Elbow (2000: 382) saying, “damn it, I want my first year students to be saying in their writing, ‘Listen to me, I have something to tell you.’”

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